DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 953 CG 022 500

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TITLE Sibling Relationships in Adulthood.
INSTITUTION National Agricultural Library (DOA), Beltsville, MD. Family Information Center.
PUB DATE Feb 90
NOTE 11p.; For other bibliographies in the series, see CG 022 489-491 and CG 022 493-499.
PUB TYPE Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; *Aging (Individuals); Older Adults; *Sibling Relationship; Siblings

ABSTRACT

This document contains a brief bibliography of peer-reviewed literature, with abstracts, on sibling relationships in adulthood. It is one of 12 bibliographies on aging prepared by the National Agricultural Library for its "Pathfinders" series of publications. Topics covered by the other 11 bibliographies include aging parents, adult children, dementia and Alzheimer's disease in the elderly (written for educators), dementia and Alzheimer's disease in the elderly (written for consumers), family caregiving, family support networks, grandparenting, humor in later life, intergenerational relationships, living arrangements in later life, and pets and the elderly. This bibliography on sibling relationship in adulthood contains citations for 8 journal articles, 4 reference books, and 4 chapters in books for researchers and educators, and 4 books and articles for consumers. It concludes with a list of organizations that readers may contact for further assistance. (NB)

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FEBRUARY 1990

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

PREPARED BY BILLIE H. FRAZIER, Ph.D., CFLE**

This PATHFINDER has been prepared to help researchers, educators and consumers better understand the significance and role of sibling relationships in adulthood.

RESEARCHER/EDUCATOR

J O U R N A L A R T I C L E S

"Ambivalence in Adult Sibling Relationships," Victoria H. Bedford. Journal of Family Issues, 10(2):211-224, June 1989.

The author sheds light on whether ambivalent characteristics of sibling relationships in childhood persist into the adult years. There seem to be three ways in which people express their feelings toward siblings: ambivalent (i.e., they don't know how they feel), positive, or negative. Women seem to be more aware of their underlying feelings toward sisters than men are toward brothers. Unmarried and childless persons are more actively involved with their siblings than married ones.

"Discriminators of Mutual Helping Behavior Among Older Adults and Their Siblings," Patricia K. Suggs. Journal of Applied Gerontology, 4(2):63-70, 1985.

The author answers an important question--what social support and mutual helping behaviors can be expected from siblings in late life? Data were collected on the mutual helping patterns of rural elderly. Respondents with the highest mutual help exchange: engaged in more activities with siblings, were married, and had educational levels similar to those of their siblings. Types of help most frequently given and received were help during illness and transportation. The study suggests that siblings in later life, while of limited functional importance in the helping network of older adults, provide essential help when needed.

This PATHFINDER lists significant resources that are judged to be accurate, readable, and available. Opinions expressed in the publication do not reflect views of the United States Department of Agriculture.

CG 022500

The National Agricultural Library is located at Beltsville, Maryland 20705

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"Feelings of Attachment to Siblings and Well-Being in Later Life," Victor G. Cicirelli. Psychology and Aging, 4(2):211-216, 1989.

The author hypothesized that the well-being of older persons depends on their perception of the closeness of the sibling bond, on their perception of any disruption of that bond, and on the sex comination of the siblings being considered. Subjects were interviewed about their relationships with each of their living siblings. They rated their feelings of closeness, conflict or rivalry, and indifference to the sibling. A measure of depression was used as the indicator of well-being. Closeness of the bond to a sister (by both men and women) was related to less depression. Also, women's perceptions of conflict and indifference in their relationships with sisters were related to increased depression. Findings are interpreted in terms of attachment theory and sex role explanations.

"Generational Solidarity: Conceptual Antecedents and Consequences," Deborah T. Gold. American Behavioral Scientist, 33(1): 19-32, September/October 1989.

Findings of this study addresses the issues surrounding intragenerational relations of older adults. First, questions are raised about constancy and change in late-life sibling relations. Hypotheses about the dynamic nature of these relationships and their specific relational dimensions are developed and tested. Second, the degree of association between sociodemographic variables and sibling relationship characteristics are investigated. Third, a theoretical discussion of a psychosocial construct unique to the late-life sibling relation, termed generational solidarity, is introduced. Suggestions for future research are offered.

"Relative Contributions of Help by Employed and Nonemployed Sisters to Their Elderly Parents," Sarah H. Matthews, Janet E. Werkner, and Paula J. Delaney. Journal of Gerontology, 44(1):S36-44, 1989.

The author presents a new approach to studying the sibling relationship by looking at their interactions with their parents. The relationship between daughters' employment status and their involvement in the provision of services to elderly parents were examined to assess whether employment status affected perceptions of parents' needs, relative contributions to parents, and relative contributions when parents' health status was poorer. Nonemployed sisters contributed relatively more tangible services than their employed sisters when parents' health status was poorer. Although nonemployed sisters usually took disproportionate responsibility for medical appointments and daytime emergencies and care, employed sisters were expected to contribute in other ways.

"Sibling Relationships in Old Age: A Typology," Deborah T. Gold. International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 28(1):37-51, 1989.

This qualitative study examines the different kinds of relationships which exist between siblings in old age and ways in which these meet or ignore the social and psychological needs of older people. Five types of sibling relationships emerged: intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile. Each type has a discrete pattern of instrumental and emotional support, and a different degree of closeness, envy, resentment, approval, and involvement with the sibling. This article also points out that sibling dyads, including at least one sister, fare better in terms of closeness than do dyads of brothers.

"Siblings in Old Age: Something Special," Deborah T. Gold, Canadian Journal on Aging, 6(3):199-215, 1987.

This article reports the findings of a qualitative study of older adult siblings. The study revealed that most sibling pairs grow closer in later life, and that regardless of the kind of relationship they have, siblings take on a new meaning for each other as they age. Those who had positive relationships with siblings found that interactions decreased feelings of loneliness, provided emotional support and validation of earlier life experiences. Feelings of closeness and sibling solidarity were observed. Siblings who had negative sibling relationships indicated a shift toward more positive feelings in later life.

"Young Adult Relationships: Siblings and Friends," Joan Pulakos. The Journal of Psychology, 123(3):237-244, 1989.

This study compared interpersonal relationships of young adults and their closest friend with their closest sibling relationship. Results indicate that the subjects felt closer to their friends than their siblings. Relationships with friends were more positive and less differentiated than with siblings. Topics were discussed more frequently with friends, and most activities involved friends more often than siblings. Females were closer and more involved with both friends and siblings than were males.

Note: This is one of the few articles that concentrates on the sibling relationships of young adults. Unfortunately, the salience of those relationships wanes when siblings are compared to friends. Adolescence and young adulthood are times during which siblings are least close. During this time, they respond to the need to form their identities, complete their educations, marry, and begin their families.

REFERENCE BOOKS

The Sibling Bond, Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1982.

This book is the first major volume that addresses issues related to the sibling bond. Dealing with the basic nature of a universal family relationship, the book describes dimensions of the bond. The impact of sibling relationships on forging identity and shaping human experience is described. The author acknowledges the interdependence of siblings throughout the life cycle. Illustrations and vignettes from famous and historical personalities are provided.

Note: These authors are psychologically oriented, hence the lack of emphasis on the social aspects of the sibling relationship. Because of the 1982 publication date, some of the more recent research is not represented in this book. However, this book will stand as a prototype of psychological sibling studies.

Siblings in Later Life: A Neglected Relationship, Victoria H. Bedford and Deborah T. Gold. Sage, 1989.

This is the newest book on the subject, an edited volume containing cutting edge research on the sibling relationship in later life. Each of the contributions to the book is a new and meaningful contribution to the literature. It is cross-cultural in that it includes a study from Canada. The issue of the death of a sibling is discussed in an article for perhaps the first time. The book fills a huge research gap in the research literature and provides multiple perspectives from a variety of disciplines in a single volume.

Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan, Michael E. Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith (eds.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1982.

A review of the existing empirical and theoretical literature concerning the nature and importance of sibling relationships is presented. Authors discuss what is known about factors affecting the development and the intensity of sibling relationships, and their endurance over time. Information on the degree of influence siblings exert on one another--both directly and indirectly through their influence on the attitudes, expectations, and behavior of their parents is included.

Note: This 1982 volume was the first attempt to trace the sibling relationship from childhood through adolescence, adulthood, and old age. More recent research has been fuilt on some of the concepts introduced in this book.

Siblings: Love, Envy & Understanding, Judy Dunn and Carol Kendrick. Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Focusing on the beginnings of relationships among siblings, this book reports a study of 40 firstborn children living with parents in England. Four concerns that are investigated include: the relationship between mother and first child before and after the sibling's birth; the reaction of the first child to events surrounding the birth; the nature of the relationship that developed between siblings; and patterns of several relationships within the family.

CHAPTERS IN BOOKS

"Important Variables in Adult Sibling Relationships: A Qualitative Study," Helgola G. Ross and Joel I. Milgram. In: Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan, Michael E. Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith (eds.) Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982, 225-249.

Three specific areas are addressed in this exploratory study of adult sibling relationships: perceptions of closeness, sibling rivalry, and critical incidents and their consequences to the relationships. The authors sought answers to the following questions: (1) what does it means to be close to a sibling, and what brings closeness about; (2) why are some siblings closer than others; (3) why are siblings closer at particular times in their lives; (4) do feelings of closeness change through the life span; and (5) how do critical incidents change feelings of closeness and sibling rivalry?

"The Role of Siblings as Family Caregivers," Victor G. Cicirelli. In: Social Support Networks and the Care of the Elderly, William J. Sauer and Raymond T. Coward (eds.). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Co., 1985, 93-107.

Perhaps the "grandfather" of sibling researchers, the author suggests that siblings are perhaps the most available, yet most under used source of social and emotional support in the American family. The following questions were investigated in this study: Do most elderly have living siblings? Do elderly have siblings living nearby? What is the quantity and quality of contact with siblings? What types of help do siblings provide each other? What are the antecedents of helping patterns between elderly siblings?

"Sibling Influence Throughout the Lifespan," Victor G. Cicirelli. In: Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan, Michael E. Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith (eds.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982, 267-284.

Evidence regarding sibling influence in adulthood and old age is beginning to accumulate. The following are some of the significant conclusions: (1) The relationship is of extremely long duration. (2) Most siblings feel close affectionally to each other. The least closeness is between brothers and the most closeness is between sisters. (3) Overt sibling rivalry appears to diminish in intensity as people get older. (4) Sisters assume a unique and important sibling role over the lifespan.

"Siblings and Other Kin," Jean Pearson Scott, In: Family Relationships in Later Life, Timothy H. Brubaker, (ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983, 47-61.

Using a limited, but representative sample, the author studied characteristics of sibling relationships and other kin and concluded that siblings fit in the support networks of older adults in a way that complements relations with children and grandchildren. One of the author's major contributions to the literature concerns the equitable nature of sibling exchanges. When helping behaviors received by the respondent were compared with helping behaviors given for each category of kin, more respondents were overbenefitted by the child and by the grandchild with whom they had the most contact. The large percentage of siblings with equitable relationships reflect the large number of respondents who were neither providing nor receiving any assistance from the sibling.

Note: Others have found that the inclusion of adult children in any survey of provision of social support may have a suppressor effect on the strength of support provided by siblings.

CONSUMER

"Kinship Rekindled," Mature Outlook, 3(6):70-79, November/December 1986.

The author states that individuals never outgrow their brothers and sisters. Furthermore, people with strong sibling ties cope better with the stresses of life after 50, perhaps because siblings who get along well talk things out during periods of problems of crisis. More than most people realize, these are the ties that bind. However, for many, low-grade friction with siblings is a way of life. The potential for conflict with adult siblings is endless. In the 50s, many adult siblings feel the need to resolve sibling conflicts. Close relationships with siblings can serve as a buffer against the stresses of major life events like retirement and widowhood.

"Mending Broken Family Ties," Joan Wester Anderson. McCalls, CXVII(4):45-49, January 1990.

Strained relationships with brothers and sisters are among the most common, but difficult-to-admit, problems experienced by adults. Unsettled childhood conflicts can also have subtle consequences. However, it is possible for siblings to become allies in adulthood when one or both have a need to heal the past and find new ways of relating. The writer discusses breaking old patterns and the necessity for interpersonal communication. Well known authorities are quoted.

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"The Sibling Bond: A Lifelong Love-Hate Dialectic," Virginia Adams. Psychology Today, 15(6):32-47, 1981.

The book by Bank and Kahn (The Sibling Bond, 1982) provides the basis for this article. The sibling relationship is a lifelong process and highly influential throughout the life cycle. It is rare for siblings to lose contact with one another. Siblings are becoming more and more dependent upon one another as the divorce rate and the number of one-parent families grow. The Hansel and Gretel relationship and sibling rivalry are discussed.

C O N T A C T F O R A S S I S T A N C E

County Cooperative Extension Service (under county government in telephone directory)

Family science, psychology, education, human ecology, home economics or aging department at a state college or university

Local Library

This PATHFINDER resulted from the author's research at the National Agricultural Library while on sabbatical leave from the University of Maryland during the summer and fall of 1989. Using database searches of AGRICOLA, Psychinfo, Social Scisearch, ERIC, Family Resources and Dissertation Abstracts International, references were reviewed and annotated. It is authored by:

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